



state senator

Connie Lawson

2005 LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

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The State Budget: Holding the Line on Spending

LEGISLATURE PASSES FIRST BALANCED BUDGET IN 10 YEARS

The Indiana General Assembly has passed a balanced two-year state budget that holds the line on spending, eliminates the structural deficit, adds no new state taxes, provides \$4 billion in property tax replacement credits and adds \$112.4 million to K-12 education.

Senate Republicans voted to control state spending while boosting funding for K-12 education, scholarships for higher education and child protection. Medicaid funding is held to a 5 percent increase. This is in contrast to the 10 percent growth experienced during the current biennium.

The passage of this budget is quite an accomplishment. To overcome a \$600 million structural deficit and end up with reserves – all without new state taxes – is no small feat.

Education funding remained a top priority by the Senate Republicans. The school funding formula is driven by an innovative approach that funds children as individuals instead of simply funding corporations. Special factors, such as poverty, single parent families and free lunches, are taken into consideration when determining the level of funding that is to follow a child.

The General Assembly continually has increased education spending in past years, even when other states were cutting education. In 2003, Indiana had the highest increase of K-12 funding in the country –

during a national recession. The new budget gives more money with more funding options to Indiana public schools than has ever been given in the history of the state.

Additionally, the state is distributing to local governments \$4 billion in property tax replacement credits (PTRC), in an effort to provide relief to homeowners and other property taxpayers. Local governments and schools levy and keep 99.9 percent of all property taxes. Half of all revenue raised by the state sales tax is used for PTRC, as is 14 percent of the income tax and nearly a half billion dollars every year from the wagering tax.

Earlier in the session, Senate Republicans voted to pass a measure to reform the property tax system by giving local governments an option to shift the property tax burden to an income tax in order to be more fair and equitable to Hoosiers. The initiative was successful in the Senate but failed to receive consideration in the House of Representatives, when the bill met substantial opposition from local government officials.

The new budget is a prescription for positive change in Indiana. It is the first balanced budget crafted by legislators in 10 years. I strongly support efforts to keep spending down while providing adequate funding for essential services.

New Laws Help Protect Children

All too often, I open my newspaper and read a story of another child being victimized. These situations have become almost commonplace in the last few years. Children are our most precious commodity, and should receive special attention from the state. The General Assembly passed several bills this session aimed at protecting Hoosier children.



In 2003, the state's sex and violent offender registry was modernized, including the requirement of a photograph of the offender that could be viewed by the public. Currently, thousands of people who have committed sex crimes or crimes against children are registered with the state. We passed two bills that will enhance the effectiveness of the registry by adding the possession of child pornography to the 14 existing offenses and by allowing neighborhood associations to receive semi-annual updates of the list.

This session, I authored Senate Enrolled Act 529, which reorganizes the Office of the Family and Social Services Administration. This department has been plagued by poor management and other problems. The bill creates the Dept. of Child Services to handle child support, child protection, adoption and foster services. Some Hoosier children are at risk for abuse and neglect, and these children deserve the proper attention from the state.

In the state budget, we provided additional funding for child protection. The budget funds the new Dept. of Child Services and provides money for Independent Living assistance for persons moving off of foster care. It funds an additional 400 caseworkers for child protection and establishes caseload standards for child protection workers.

The General Assembly will continue to be vigilant in seeking new ways to protect our children.

Rx FOR INDIANA

IMPROVING ACCESS TO PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Governor Mitch Daniels has created "Rx for Indiana," a pharmaceutical patient assistance program which allows lower-income Hoosiers to receive the prescription drugs they need for free or at significantly reduced prices. Since the beginning of the program in early March, more than 37,000 Indiana residents have qualified for the program.

Nearly 60 health care, business, community and consumer groups have joined the governor to help improve Indiana citizens' access to prescription medicine. The Rx for Indiana program was developed to build upon the success of other national programs, as it links patients with information about pharmaceutical assistance programs provided by companies and the state and federal government.

Rx for Indiana provides residents access to information about more than 275 public and private prescription assistance programs that provide more than 1,800 medications. In order to take part in the program, Indiana residents must answer a few short questions to verify eligibility. The resident will then be informed of the pharmaceutical patient assistance programs for which he or she qualifies.

Rx for Indiana can save individuals thousands of dollars per year. Before the establishment of Rx for Indiana, only about one in 10 Hoosiers were taking advantage of the reduced cost medicines available. We hope that with the creation of this program, many more Hoosiers will be able to access the medications they need.

To apply for the Rx for Indiana program, visit www.rxforindiana.com or call toll-free 1-877-793-0765. The Web site is available in Spanish and English, and Spanish-speaking telephone operators are available.

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Photo: Sen. Lawson addresses the full Senate to discuss the special needs of abused children.

Fighting Meth

Methamphetamine production has become widespread in our state, and this year the legislature has proven its commitment to curbing this criminal activity.

In 2003, Indiana law enforcement seized 422 meth labs, a figure higher than any other Midwestern state, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

It is difficult to catch meth producers. All of the ingredients needed to manufacture meth can be purchased legally and are relatively inexpensive. For example, an investment of \$1,000 in easily purchased ingredients can produce \$20,000 worth of meth.

This year, we passed a bill to regulate the sale and purchase of meth precursors in the hope of reducing production in Indiana. Senate Enrolled Act 444 includes a variety of measures designed to stop the production of meth by placing restrictions on the sale and purchase of drugs containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, commonly found in over-the-counter cold and allergy medicines.

Retailers must store such drugs in a locked display case or behind a counter that requires employee assistance. Pharmacies may place the drugs directly in front of the pharmacy counter in the line of sight of a pharmacy employee and in an area under constant video monitoring.

Customers purchasing these drugs must present identification and record their identifying information in a log book provided and maintained by the retailer.

The bill bars retailers from selling the drugs to individuals under age 18 and allows no more than 3 grams of drugs containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine in any one transaction. It also prevents customers from purchasing more than 3 grams of such drugs in a single week.

Meth production has become a significant problem in Indiana. We have no choice but to fight back with every available weapon.

Rooting Out Voter Fraud

Secure, fair elections are essential to preserving the rights of all Americans

Voting in a fair and credible election is at the heart of American citizenship. It is the Legislature’s responsibility to adopt policies that protect our representative democracy by ensuring each vote cast is valid and legal.

A group of Senate bills were introduced this year to update outmoded election laws, reinforce the integrity of voting absentee and strengthen voters’ rights at the polls by ensuring their votes are secure.

Of all the reform initiatives, none may be as critical as Senate Enrolled Act 483.

SEA 483 requires citizens to show government-issued photo identification at the polls before voting. Photo IDs are required for many commonplace circumstances that Americans face every day, like renting a video or obtaining a library card. It only makes sense that a photo ID be required for something as important as voting.

In fact, many voters are surprised to learn they are not currently required to show some form of identification at the polls. It is not uncommon for a voter to arrive at the polling place and instinctively reach for a purse or wallet to retrieve an ID, only to be told it is unnecessary.

Years ago, poll workers knew the people in their precinct and had no reason to question someone’s identity. Now, it is increasingly common for Election Day volunteers to live in another town or city than the one in which they are serving. The voter ID bill gives poll workers a tool to verify a person’s identity. Considering recent nationwide voting problems, and some within Indiana, this

is a common-sense step to help prevent fraud.

Objections to requiring a photo ID stem from a concern that some voters cannot afford the \$9 fee needed to purchase a state ID card. The Bureau of Motor Vehicles has agreed to grant photo IDs free of charge to those who cannot pay. Residents of state-licensed nursing homes are exempt from showing identification if a polling place is located in the facility where they reside. The bill also protects the rights of those who have a religious objection to being photographed.

Voters who show up at the polls without identification will be able to fill out a provisional ballot. They then will be required to visit the county clerk or election board’s office and show an ID or object on religious grounds. The bill also requires the state of Indiana to mail out notices informing Hoosiers of the new requirements before the next election.

In 2003, the BMV issued 5.6 million driver licenses and 1.4 million state ID cards.

This simple change in the rules will inspire more confidence in the election process and in our state government. Legislators want to protect voters’ rights and assure that every vote is counted fairly and equally.



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EXPANDING

Convention center growth and a new stadium could boost central Indiana’s economy.

The ink is barely dry on the governor’s signature, but details about a new Colts stadium and expanded Indiana Convention Center are in full swing. The centerpiece for a funding mechanism is a 1 percent food and beverage tax on Marion County and the seven “doughnut” counties. While some have voiced concerns about funding these projects with taxpayer dollars, I am certain that Indiana will be better off for it.

Leaders from Marion County and the doughnut counties have supported this funding plan. All of the money raised in Marion County (approximately \$17 million) will go toward the stadium and convention center projects. The amount the doughnut counties contribute to the projects, however, is capped at \$5 million, meaning those counties will get to keep at least half of the revenue raised.

The revenue generated from a food and beverage tax can be considered a major investment:

- Presently, Marion County benefits from a combined total of over \$165 million in sales just as the host of the Colts and NCAA headquarters.
- The convention center currently adds \$361 million in sales.
- In Marion County, the Colts contribute \$1.9 million in taxes to the Capital Improvement Board and another \$710,000 in income tax.
- A study conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2004 estimated that the convention center and stadium contribute over \$22 million dollars in sales, income and gasoline tax to the state.

A new NFL stadium also serves as a venue for many other activities that bring millions of dollars to the region. Last year, more than 1.3 million people visited the stadium for entertainment activities of all kinds including NCAA basketball. The proposed stadium helps keep the



LEFT: Sen. Connie Lawson listens to testimony during a meeting of the Senate Committee on Elections and Civic Affairs, of which she is chairwoman. The committee addressed a variety of election law issues during this session.

NCAA in the state until 2039. This important player contributes \$63.3 million annually and another \$85 million per five-year cycle for events related to March Madness.

As far as conventions are concerned, the Indiana Convention Center has attracted several big-name conventions over the years, but these groups have been growing. Three top conventions have left town, and a few more are shopping around. One of the conventions that has left, the Performance Racing Industry (PRI), brought \$26 million in direct spending every year. That is the equivalent spending amount of one Final Four weekend. While the Final Four comes to Indy once in a while, PRI conventioners were spending their dollars here every year.

According to the PricewaterhouseCoopers study, an expanded convention center could attract new business (18 to 23 major conventions and trade shows and four or five consumer shows per year) with an economic impact of an additional \$165 million annually. The study also suggests that the expansion could create 2,700 new jobs.

It may be easy to find reasons to ignore the need for a new stadium and larger convention center. One must remember, however, that none of Indiana’s 92 counties is an island. Ask any area that has lost a major professional sports franchise: you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.

Education Initiatives Successful in 2005 Session

This year, the state tackled several key issues to improve education:

- Current state law requires children to be five years old on July 1 of a school year to be eligible to attend **kindergarten**, making Hoosier children the oldest kindergartners in the country. This year, we moved the kindergarten enrollment date to include children who turn five years old no later than August 1, 2006. While state law does not require parents to enroll children who may not be ready for kindergarten, children who turn five during the summer months should be welcome in our schools.
- Another important initiative requires students, beginning in 2008-2009, to complete the **Core 40 curriculum** in order to graduate from high school. This program of study requires no additional credits but rather calls for fewer electives and more math, science and social studies classes to fulfill the 40 credit requirement for graduation. There are exceptions for some students whose parents object and for special education students. The bill also requires that parents be notified when a student is in danger of failing the Core 40 requirements and graduate qualifying exam. Institutions of higher education in Indiana will require applicants to complete these Core 40 requirements for admission.
- **Charter schools** are state-funded public schools that operate free of many state regulations, but are accountable for their results in the same manner as traditional public schools, as well as by the terms of a charter. They provide new learning opportunities through innovative curriculums and environments. One bill passed this session eases funding restrictions for charter schools in order give them at least a few of the same opportunities afforded to other public schools. We must continue to support these important partners in education.

SEA 12 — The "Code Adam" program sets a protocol for lost or missing children in certain state buildings. This initiative, on a smaller scale, is similar to the popular and successful "Amber Alert" program. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

HEA 1501— This bill establishes the position of inspector general, an employee of the governor, who works to weed out corruption. Years of scandal in previous administrations cost the state at least \$25 million; we may never know the full extent of misspending. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

SEA 304 — The role of National Guard members deserves special recognition due to their increased responsibilities. This bill exempts spouses and children of National Guard members killed in state active duty from paying tuition at any state educational institution. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

SEA 76 — This law requires a health care provider to provide a pregnant woman with information regarding the availability of ultrasound imaging and auscultation of heart tones of a fetus before performing an abortion. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

Sen. Lawson had a 100% voting attendance record in 2005.